

The Still Point
A Time of Meditation and Reflection
Fourth Sunday of Advent

... At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance...

T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*

Peace on each one who comes in need;
Peace on each one who comes in joy.
Peace on each one who offers prayers;
Peace on each one who offers song.
Peace of the Maker, Peace of the Son,
Peace of the Spirit, the Triune One.

Opening Prayer

God of all hope and joy,
open our hearts in welcome,
that your Son Jesus Christ at his coming
may find in us a dwelling prepared for himself;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The Gospel

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Poem: *from The Cherry Tree Carol*

traditional; Child Ballad 54B

Joseph was an old man,
 and an old man was he,
 And he married Mary,
 the Queen of Galilee.
When Joseph was married,
 and Mary home had brought,
 Mary proved with child,
 and Joseph knew it not.
Joseph and Mary walked
 through a garden gay,
 Where the cherries they grew
 upon every tree.
O then bespoke Mary,
 with words both meek and mild:
 ‘O gather me cherries, Joseph,
 they run so in my mind.’
And then replied Joseph,
 with words so unkind:
 ‘Let him gather thee cherries
 that got thee with child.’
O then bespoke our Saviour,
 all in his mother’s womb:
 ‘Bow down, good cherry-tree,
 to my mother’s hand.’
The uppermost sprig
 bowed down to Mary’s knee:
 ‘Thus you may see, Joseph,
 these cherries are for me.’
‘O eat your cherries, Mary,
 O eat your cherries now;
 O eat your cherries, Mary,
 that grow upon the bough.’
As Joseph was a walking,
 he heard an angel sing:
 ‘This night shall be born
 our heavenly king.’

Meditation

Like his namesake in Hebrew Scripture, Joseph son of Jacob, Joseph of the house and lineage of David is a dreamer. The earlier Joseph who went down into Egypt dreamed, and interpreted the dreams of others; his dream of mastery over his brothers caused his downfall, and in Egypt his foretelling of years of plenty and years of famine saved him from prison, delivered an entire nation, and brought reconciliation to his family. The Joseph of the house and lineage of David

dreams twice, and both times trusts the fearful message, “do not be afraid.” His trust leads him to shield Mary and her child from shame and isolation, and to take them to safety, back to the land of Egypt that once, paradoxically, sheltered and saved his namesake and all his kindred.

The earliest versions of the ballad now known as the Cherry Tree Carol come from mystery plays of the middle ages, with a grain of narrative from as early as the 7th century CE. The ballad picks up on the – quite reasonable – anxiety of a bridegroom faced with what is called by genealogists a “non-paternity event.” The cherry, of course, is a long-established symbol of virginity, both its value and its fragility. Ultimately, the beauty of the ballad may be the tension between Joseph’s anger and disappointment and Mary’s serenity, resolved into reconciliation, as in the gospel passage, by a message from the divine.

Questions for Reflection

When you think about Joseph, what thoughts and feelings do you ascribe to him? What are your own thoughts and feelings when you consider his situation?

Which telling of the story do you prefer? The gospel account, or the ballad? Why?

You might want to listen to these very different versions of the carol, among the many and various to be found on YouTube:

Girls’ Choir of Ely Cathedral:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlqSAyp34TU>

Pentangle:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=cherry+tree+carol+youtube&oq=cherry+tree+carol&aqs=chrome.o.69i59l2j69i57j69i60j69i61l2.5542j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:45282c61,vid:C31BZovXAVY>

The Cambridge Singers:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-i9zcxVgeQ>

The Wiggles:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlqSAyp34TU>

Prayers

We bring before God someone whom we have met or remembered today

We bring to God someone who is hurting tonight and needs our prayer

We bring to God a troubled situation in our world

We bring to God, silently, someone whom we find hard to forgive or trust

We bring ourselves to God that we might grow in generosity of spirit, clarity of mind, and warmth of affection

We offer our thanks to God for the blessings in our lives

We name before God those who have died.

Gracious God, you hear all our prayers: those we speak aloud, those we hold in our hearts, and those prayers for which we have no words. Hear the prayers of your people, and grant them as may be best for us, for the sake of your holy name. **Amen.**

Accept our thanks for all you have done, O God. Our hands were empty, and you filled them.

May Christ's holy, healing, enabling Spirit be with us every step of the way, and be our guide as our road changes and turns, and the blessing of God our Creator, Redeemer and Giver of life be among us now and remain with us forever. **Amen.**

Poem and Reflection offered by: Rev'd Elizabeth Randall